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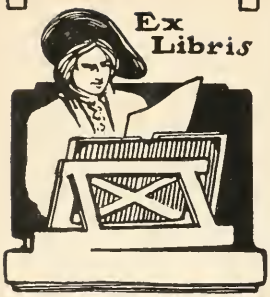

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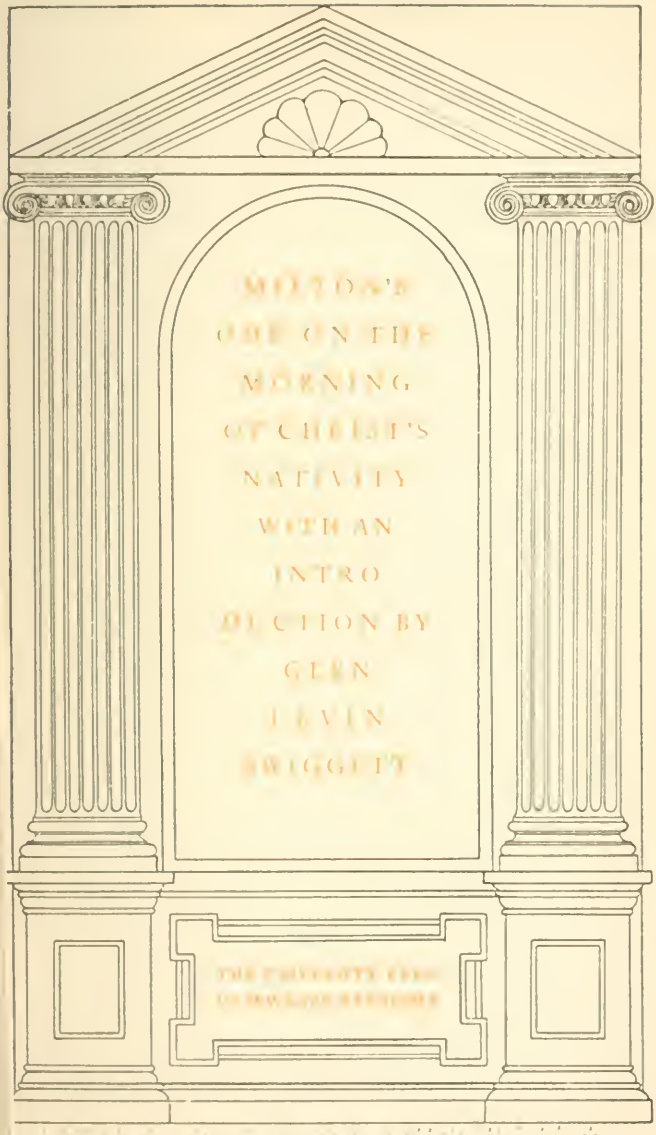
MILTON'S ODE ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY


MILTON'S
ODE ON THE
MORNING
OF CHRIST'S
NATIVITY
WITH AN
INTRO
DUCTION BY
GLEN
LEVIN
SWIGGETT

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA
AT LOS ANGELES

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Dona quidem dedimus Christi natalibus illa;
Illa sub auroram lux mihi prima tulit.
—*Elegia Sexta.*

HUGGING the hem of the university buildings by the Cam, stands to-day Christ's College with its beautiful Christ's Piece, haunted by the shades of many of England's men of glory, great among whom is blind and glorious Milton. Within the hallowed walls of Christ's, John Milton spent seven years. Its "studious cloisters pale" and secluded Walk, honored with the name of England's greatest epic poet, set the traveler's soul aglow to-day as he lingers, in pleasant retrospection, midst these silent witnesses of the hand that penned one early Christmas morn, *anno domini* sixteen hundred and twenty-nine, while "all the spangled host" kept "watch in squadrons bright," the magnificent ode that is perhaps, says Hallam, "the finest in the English language."

We may not incline to the judgment of Hallam anent this wonderful effort of a young man of twenty-one. Ward does not include the "Hymn on the Nativity" in his "English Poets," and the biographies of Mil-

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ton give it but passing notice. The poem may be full of "frigid conceits," as Pattison says; or betray, as Garnett remarks, "discordance with modern sentiment;" yet, as an earnest of that to come, this beautiful poem stands transcendent among the poems of youth in the English language. In it Milton contracts a great debt to his music-loving father. In tuneful rhythm he rises, in his flight, to genuine poetic heights, felling in strokes of splendid diction the dark-starred phantoms that would stay the Coming of the Master, and concluding, as Garnett says, "by an exquisite turn, when suddenly the poet sinks back into his original key, and finally harmonizes his strain by the divine repose of a concluding picture worthy of Correggio."

The hour and the tide were in conjunction when Milton had this dream which he has told in lines of epic grandeur, luminous with the light that comes to us but once a year and attuned to the music of the Heavenly spheres, of which he was so fond. Milton has essayed with signal success the spirit of "Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men." The cult of Jove, of Attic beauty, and the adoration of Christ are curiously interblended in this poem, the one poetically enhancing the spiritual beauty of the other. In the

range of English poetry I know no lines of greater consonance with the deep peace and welling joy of Christmas morning; no lines in the realm of Christian literature more fit to hail the Advent of the Star to which all eyes are cast in eager longing at this time, than the several strophes of the poem beginning:—

> But he, her fears to cease,
> Sent down the meek-eyed Peace:
> She, crowned with olive green, came softly sliding
> Down through the turning sphere,
> His ready harbinger,
> With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing,
> And, waiving wide her myrtle wand,
> She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

To lovers of this beautiful hymn Cambridge, the place of its birth, will ever be dear, although here, as well as in London, time has wrought great changes. In London haunt after haunt of Milton has given way to fire and material progress; and Christ's presents no longer the outward appearance of Milton's day. To him who observes with the inner eye, however, the spirit of John Milton is there to receive him. Despite the legendary mulberry-tree and the modernized Christ's, to the traveler of to-day at Cambridge come back, swift-conjured by some impelling force, lines

from *L' Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Lycidas*, *Comus* and the great English Christian epics; and one remembers that it was here that this English boy nourished and fostered an earnest purpose to consecrate himself to lofty thought and feeling, so that his life and the fruit thereof might redound to the glory of God and the benefit of mankind. At the age of twenty-three, on the eve of leaving Cambridge, he gives us in lines that suggest Petrarca, Villon and Keats a spiritual inventory, in which he speaks, perhaps with too much deprecation, of his poetic work: —

> Yet, be it less or more, or soon or slow,
> It shall be still in strictest measure even
> To that same lot, however mean or high,
> Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heaven,
> All is, if I have grace to use it so,
> As ever in my great Task-Master's eye.

We can see this English lad sitting in the hushed silence of the night by his "lamp at the midnight hour within some high and lonely tower" outwatching the Bear, or musing, in some quiet retreat near his father's home at Horton, on the departing glories of Greece as his Cavalier soul, expanding to the "amplitude of things," resolves to take the step leading to the Puri-

tan poem that has set the seal of epic genius on the English language. I do not mean to say that this young Englishman was conscious of all this; that he was dimly prescient of some great unknown thing there can be no doubt. At the close of his stay at Horton in sixteen hundred and thirty-seven he wrote to his friend of the days at St. Paul's, Diodati: "You make many inquiries as to what I'm about;—of what I am thinking? Why, with God's help of immortality! Forget the word, I only whisper it in your ear! Yes, I am pluming my wings for a flight." Does this refer to that land of indefinable beauty out of which the White Swan came? I am inclined to question this, despite the Latin lines of sixteen hundred and thirty-eight in which Milton shows how greatly he felt the magic of the Celtic past drawing him in its most kingly representative. It was to be reserved for Tennyson, likewise of Cambridge, to continue the tradition of Malory.

Fate has many a fling in playful irony with the puppets we call men, but it has spared us a fearful shudder in the thought that this sturdy son of Saxon yeomanry, attracted by the twilight beauty indwelling in the Celtic king, might never have poetically realized in later life that unexampled vision, the preparation for

which began at Cambridge, glimpses of which he caught at Horton, which drew him to Italy and prompted a speedy return, and which was to be to him a source of comfort during the days of agitation, of regicide and the Restoration. *Paradise Lost*, on which Milton worked continuously from sixteen hundred and fifty-seven was finished by sixteen hundred and sixty-three. There are lines in it, however, that date from sixteen hundred and forty-two. But back of this, in the sweep of years when the spirit of Christ played like an ambient flame around the soul of the growing boy and maturing man, we must seek for a beginning in time for this poem. The boyish Paraphrases of the Davidic Psalms, written in the shadow of St. Paul's, clustered 'round with memories that suggest the early life of a boy developing midst Christian influences, and the two Cambridge poems, the "Nativity" and the "Passion," full with the love of the Christian God and tender with the tears of Christ, reveal the play of this flame and foreshadow Milton's great epic. The gardens of Horton, so often looked upon as the place where Milton was wont to trod the primrose path of dalliance, have a deep significance in his life, for it was doubtless here that the Cavalier who could write such exquisite Pagan poetry

as *Lycidas* and *Comus* heard the voice which made him the poet of Puritan England.

Milton has felt, as many a poet has and will, the hand of dishonor in his own land. Far from the "Poets' Corner" in stately Westminster Abbey, built by England's religious king, the remains of England's religious poet were laid to rest in the nave of the little Church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, not far from the haunts of his last days. One may read the lettered stone and feel a passing sense of anger at this injustice; at the thought that the ashes of Milton suffered profanation in seventeen hundred and ninety, one's anger gives way to sad and silent pity. It is then that one likes to withdraw to Golden Lane, which is near by, and follow, in the revery of reverence, Milton's funeral train that must have passed that way.

England rights a wrong magnanimously, despite the vicissitudes of politics. The case of Cromwell, Milton's stern master, thrice honored and twice dishonored by his country, presents itself with striking force to the pilgrim to Milton's shrine, in which church Oliver Cromwell, on the day of his marriage, must have looked out on the world with kindlier eye than in the days when Milton served him. Close to West-

minster Hall stands Thorneycroft's Cromwell, unveiled in November, eighteen hundred and ninety-nine, and in the "Poets' Corner" of the Abbey there is, in Rysbrack's monument, a grateful recognition by the English people of the sovereign genius of John Milton, who after two centuries and more of recrimination and misunderstanding has come into his heritage. Of him Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln's, Oxford, says, in closing his excellent little "Life:" "The Church never forgives and faction does not die out. But Milton has been, for two centuries, getting beyond the reach of party, whether as friends or as foes. . . . . We shall prefer to read the fashionable novels of each season as it passes, but we shall choose to be represented at the international congress of world poets by Shakespeare and Milton; Shakespeare first, and next Milton."

ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY

ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY

I

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's Eternal King,
Of wedded maid and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

II

That glorious form, that light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heaven's high council-table
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside, and, here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

III

Say, Heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome him to this his new abode,
Now while the heaven, by the Sun's team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

IV

See how from far upon the eastern road
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet!
Oh! run; prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
And join thy voice unto the Angel Quire,
From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

THE HYMN

I

T was the winter wild,
While the heaven-born child
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature, in awe to him,
Had doffed her gaudy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathize:
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the Sun, her lusty paramour.

II

Only with speeches fair
She woos the gentle air
To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
The saintly veil of maiden white to throw;
Confounded, that her Maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

III

But he, her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace:
  She, crowned with olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere,
His ready harbinger,
  With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing;
And, waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

IV

No war, or battle's sound,
Was heard the world around;
  The idle spear and shield were high uphung;
The hookèd chariot stood,
Unstained with hostile blood;
  The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng;
And kings sat still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by.

V

But peaceful was the night
Wherein the Prince of Light
  His reign of peace upon the earth began.
The winds, with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kissed,
  Whispering new joys to the mild Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmèd
    wave.

VI

The stars, with deep amaze,
Stand fixed in steadfast gaze,
  Bending one way their precious influence,
And will not take their flight,
For all the morning light,
  Or Lucifer that often warned them thence;
But in their glimmering orbs did glow,
Until their Lord himself bespake, and bid them go.

VII

And, though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
The Sun himself withheld his wonted speed,
And hid his head for shame,
As his inferior flame
The new-enlightened world no more should need:
He saw a greater Sun appear
Than his bright throne or burning axletree could bear.

VIII

The shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sat simply chatting in a rustic row;
Full little thought they then
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly come to live with them below:
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep.

IX

When such music sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet
As never was by mortal finger strook,
Divinely-warbled voice
Answering the stringed noise,
As all their souls in blissful rapture took:
The air, such pleasure loth to lose,
With thousand echoes still prolongs each heavenly close.

X

Nature, that heard such sound
Beneath the hollow round
Of Cynthia's seat the airy region thrilling,
Now was almost won
To think her part was done,
And that her reign had here her last fulfilling:
She knew such harmony alone
Could hold all Heaven and Earth in happier union.

XI

At last surrounds their sight
A globe of circular light,
  That with long beams the shame faced Night arrayed;
The helmèd cherubim
And sworded seraphim
  Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displayed,
Harping in loud and solemn quire,
With unexpressive notes, to Heaven's new-born Heir.

XII

Such music (as 'tis said)
Before was never made,
  But when of old the Sons of Morning sung,
While the Creator great
His constellations set,
  And the well-balanced World on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel keep.

XIII

Ring out, ye crystal spheres!
Once bless our human ears,
  If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;
  And let the bass of heaven's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to the angelic symphony.

XIV

For, if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
  Time will run back and fetch the Age of Gold;
And speckled Vanity
Will sicken soon and die;
  And leprous Sin will melt from earthly mould;
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

XV

Yea, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
  Orbed in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,
Mercy will sit between,
Throned in celestial sheen,
  With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering;
And Heaven, as at some festival,
Will open wide the gates of her high palace-hall.

XVI

But wisest Fate says No,
This must not yet be so;
  The Babe lies yet in smiling infancy
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss,
  So both himself to glorify:
Yet first, to those ychained in sleep,
The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through
    the deep,

XVII

With such a horrid clang
As on Mount Sinai rang,
  While the red fire and smouldering clouds out
    brake:
The aged Earth, aghast,
With terror of that blast,
  Shall from the surface to the centre shake,
When, at the world's last session,
The dreadful Judge in middle air shall spread his
    throne.

XVIII

And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
  But now begins; for from this happy day
The Old Dragon, underground,
In straiter limits bound,
  Not half so far casts his usurpèd sway,
And, wroth to see his kingdom fail,
Swings the scaly horror of his tail.

XIX

The Oracles are dumb;
No voice or hideous hum
Runs through the archèd roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance, or breathèd spell,
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

XX

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard and loud lament;
From haunted spring, and dale
Edged with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent;
With flower-inwoven tresses torn
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

XXI

In consecrated earth,
And on the holy hearth,
  The Lars and Lemures moan with midnight plaint;
In urns, and altars round,
A drear and dying sound
  Affrights the flamens at their service quaint;
And the chill marble seems to sweat,
While each peculiar Power forgoes his wonted seat.

XXII

Peor and Baälim
Forsake their temples dim,
  With that twice-battered God of Palestine;
And moonèd Ashtaroth,
Heaven's queen and mother both,
  Now sits not girt with tapers' holy shine:
The Lybic Hammon shrinks his horn;
In vain the Tyrian maids their wounded Thammuz
    mourn.

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XXIII

And sullen Moloch, fled,
Hath left in shadows dread
His burning idol all of blackest hue;
In vain with cymbal's ring
They call the grisly king,
In dismal dance about the furnace blue;
The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis, and Orus, and the dog Anubis, haste.

XXIV

Nor is Osiris seen
In Memphian grove or green,
Trampling the unshowered grass with lowings loud;
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest;
Nought but profoundest Hell can be his shroud;
In vein with timbreled anthems dark,
The sable-stolèd sorcerers bear his worshiped ark.

XXV

He feels from Juda's land
The dreaded Infant's hand;
The rays of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyn;
Nor all the gods beside
Longer dare abide,
Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine:
Our Babe, to show his Godhead true,
Can in his swaddling bands control the damnèd crew.

XXVI

So, when the sun in bed,
Curtained with cloudy red,
Pillows his chin upon an orient wave,
The flocking shadows pale
Troop to the infernal jail,
Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave,
And the yellow-skirted fays
Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-loved
maze.

XXVII

But see! the virgin blest
Hath laid her Babe to rest.
Time is our tedious song should here have ending:
Heaven's youngest-teemèd star
Hath fixed her polished car,
Her sleeping Lord with handmaid lamp attending;
And all about the courtly stable
Bright-harnessed Angels sit in order serviceable.

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